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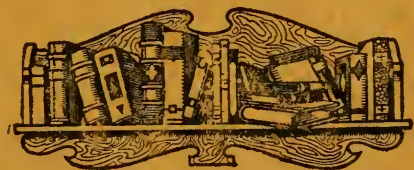




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ANCIENT HOUSES
By Capt. Thomas Prince Howes



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ANCIENT HOUSES.

A paper read before the Cape Cod Historical Society, February 22, 1888, by Capt. Thomas Prince Howes.

I propose in my remarks, on this occasion, to indulge in some rambling talks about the homes of a few of our people, with whose lives I am somewhat acquainted, by tradition and family papers.

We still have left standing in our midst, here and there, a venerable house,—time-worn and decayed — which has sheltered six or seven generations, and remains as an object lesson in our domestic history. We need go but a few rods from this hall to find an illustration of the truth of this. The house built by Col John Thacher, son of the grantor Anthony, and handed down from sire to son for six generations, yet stands. When that house was erected, in 1680, Plymouth was not united to Massachusetts; Charles II was king of England; William Penn had not crossed the Atlantic; the Mississippi river was unexplored, and the English language unspoken west of Lake Ontario. It was twenty years before any post route was established in Massachusetts. There is no building on the peninsula of Boston of equal antiquity; it antedates Christ church by forty-three years; and the oldest brick building, which is the corner book store, by thirty-two years. The distinguished man who built that house and those who succeeded him in its occupancy have deserved well of their countrymen.

Col John Thacher, prominent in the second generation of Cape men, active in the field, and wise in counsel; Judge Peter Thacher and his grandson, Judge George Thacher, who is still remembered by persons living, and his brother, Col Thomas, a worthy and trusted citizen of Yarmouth—all honored and honorable men.

One can imagine what matters of public concern in the history of the infant colonies, have been discussed within the walls of that house. England and France were seldom at peace, and the men of Thacher blood were ready to take a hand, when men had to go to the front; and in church and town affairs their services were in request. The men of early times, when that and other old houses were built, were without the assistance of newspapers to tell what they ought to do. Not a solitary newspaper in British America, and hardly a book except the Bible; certainly no novels, unless The Pilgrim's Progress, if any had that, which is very doubtful. but they appear to have got on without the aid of the daily paper or the public library, for two or three generations at least; and it is doubtful if our fathers would have been much interested in reading books if they had been obtainable. The minister must have been about the only man of any pretensions to literary culture, and his reading must have been limited to few books. No doubt he was a frequent visitor at any home of the Thachers. Col John Thacher was the son, it is said, of one who had officiated as a

curate in England, and grandson of Peter, a rector of the church. Among other matters which had to be settled in those days, was the delicate one of seating the congregation in the meeting house, and as time went on, the enlarging the house of worship, and, at last, the building of a new one at old Yarmouth, and the division of the parish.

I confess to an affectionate interest in that old Thacher dwelling, for various reasons, and one is, perhaps, that Mr Anthony Thacher and my ancestor were warm personal friends, coming on to the Cape together, as grantors of the settlement. They lived in loving harmony for twenty-seven years after founding the town. The will of Thomas Howes, which is witnessed by the Rev Thomas Thornton, mentions Mr Anthony Thacher, and calls him "my beloved friend," and Mr Thacher and his wife, Mistress Elizabeth Thacher, are witnesses to a codicil of the will. Another reason for my interest is that it was the first house I had the privilege of entering in Yarmouth. It seems a long time ago, when riding over from Dennis, on horseback behind my father, we dismounted and entered one of the two front doors, with which the house was then furnished. That was more than sixty years since. The occasion must have been the keeping of a family relationship, growing out of a marriage of one of the daughters of Peter Thacher, Jr., to my grandfather, Jeremiah Howes. Tempe Thacher married Capt John Hedge of Yarmouth, who was one of the victims of the prison ship in New York harbor. She was a sister of Judge George Thacher and Col Thomas Thacher, whose daughter occupied the house at the time I have mentioned. For her second husband she accepted Lieut Jeremiah Howes, and went to Dennis to live, where she died in 1808. A marble slab in the burial ground commemorates her memory, and also that of her first husband, Capt John Hedge, and her only son, Capt Daniel Hedge, who was lost at sea with all his crew, in the winter of 1804. The oldest daughter, Mary, upon her father's death, went to live with her uncle, Judge Thacher, at Biddeford, Maine, where she married a young lawyer, who had been a student in the office of the Judge, and afterwards settled in Wiscasset and became a member of congress; his name was Silas Lee; he was a prominent political and business man in Maine, in the early part of the century. Mr and Mrs Lee used to make occasional visits to Yarmouth and Dennis, driving down in a carriage and pair, with a colored driver on the box. The advent of lawyer Lee and his wife, in their coach, into the quiet and primitive village of Nobscussett, eighty years ago, created quite a stir, and no little gossip. And then grandmother Howes, as I used to hear her called, must take a trip to Wiscasset to see her daughter. A letter I have in my possession, from Mrs Lee to my grandfather, details her journey home and the places she was to stop at. It was no trifling affair to journey by land from Wiscasset to Dennis in the year 1800. Leaving, as we must, the Thacher house with all its associations, my memory recalls many old homes on the road as we journey eastward towards Dennis. The old one which contains a portion of the old meeting house built in Yarmouth. Another,

occupied in my boyhood by Mr Benjamin Howes, its site now covered with pine trees. On the spot where Mr Lincoln Robbins lived formerly stood a large two-story house, the abode of Squire Atherton Hall, who kept a tavern. The road from South Dennis intersected the Dennis road at this point, and men journeying from different parts of the town to Boston on horseback, as they wholly did in the winter, would make engagements to meet at this house, to commence their journey together.

Another old house I remember, beyond the one last mentioned, an old Taylor house. The Taylor property lay mostly, I fancy, around in the region of Hockonom. Mr Lothrop Taylor lived in this house, and the high hill in Honkonom was called "Lothrop's Hill." The Taylor fields are now covered with pine woods and the remembrance of the lives and names of the early Taylors, like many others, is likely to be lost under the mold of years.

Coming into Dennis, I can remember some twenty old-fashioned two-story houses. They were built from the timber grown in our own woods, oak and pine. The boards and shingles were imported; bricks were made at our own kilns. The framing differed somewhat from that in vogue in these days. In the construction of the two-story houses, the timbers that supported the garret floors projected beyond the front of the building, and the rafters were tenanted into them, so as to form the heavy jet, and also binding the frame firmly together. A huge piece of timber, called the "summer tree," formed the support for the sleepers of the chamber floor. As most of the old houses were upon

somewhat low ground, it was not safe to dig a deep cellar, and so to give convenient height to the walls, the floor was raised some few feet, and a bedroom built over the cellar. This was called the "stair bedroom," and was common to most of the houses built in the last century. If there was a maiden lady in the family it was usually her private apartment, and here were stored the heirlooms of the family — the ancient chest of drawers and the old looking glass of some grandmother and other precious articles of inherited household goods.

The Cape is a land abounding in fresh water ponds and running brooks, an attractive feature in the landscape to an emigrant seeking a permanent home and looking forward to the rearing of flocks and herds. Accordingly we find most of the family mansions, the large two-story structures, near some stream. Along on both sides of the brook which runs through the ancient village of the Nobscussetts, stood within my recollection, eleven of these old homes of the fathers,— Halls, Crowells, Vincents, Eldrdiges, and Howes, had erected dwellings on the low ground, where water was plenty and the soil good. In one the minister resided, the Rev Josiah Dennis, a name still fragrant with pleasant memories. The house is standing and can boast of a "stair bedroom."

Another venerable house, long the family homestead of one branch of the Halls, is to be noticed as the birthplace of Nathaniel Freeman, the revolutionary patriot, know as Brigadier Freeman. He was born in Dennis, then Yarmouth, in 1741. His father was at that time teacher of the school in the town. This house is yet remaining.

In one of these ancient homes of my race which is still left, many of the hours of my childhood and youth were passed in listening to tales of old men and old times from the lips of an uncle of my father's, who had inherited the house and family traditions from his father and grandfather. This house was built about 1700

by Prince Howes, grandson of Thomas, the first of the name. The mother of Prince was the youngest daughter of Gov Thomas Prince. The restless spirit of emigration seized one of Prince's brothers, and he pushed off and settled in Pemoquid, Maine. Of the four sons of Prince, two left home to improve their fortunes abroad. One, Jeremiah, going to Plymouth, and another whose name was also Prince, went to Oblong, where were soon gathered a large colony of Cape names, and where he found money was very scarce and hard to get — an experience very common with people who go seeking their fortune.

Prince Howes, the elder, went to Hockonom for his wife, marrying in 1695 Dorcas Joyce, daughter of Hosea Joyce. Two of his daughters in turn married men from old Yarmouth, viz.: Jonathan Hallet to Desire, 1719, and Dorcas to James Matthews, in 1723. In fact, my old uncle, whom I have introduced, himself in 1774, took a wife from the daughters of Yarmouth, Susannah Matthews, daughter of Dea Isaac Matthews. And so it can be seen that about every person in Yarmouth and Dennis is genetically related, for what is true of this family is also true of nearly every other. Here in this home by the evening fire, uncle Jonathan would relate stories of whaling voyages to the straits of

Belle Isle and the St Lawrence—"Canada River," he called it— and some dim sort of a reminiscence of witnessing tea thrown overboard, and of his rowing through it, but not daring to appropriate any for his own use.

He did not himself go to war in the Revolution, but was enrolled as home guard, and went to meeting with gun and military equipments. His memory went back to the old French war, and he remembered the comet of 1759—"blazing star"—he spoke of it as something potentious, and so it was in the minds of the men of that generation, for it might in their imagination from "his horrid hair shake pestilence and war." This old gentleman had great faith in the existence of witches, and in other preternatural appearances, such as apparitions and warnings from the unseen world. These views were commonly held by the generation to which he belonged, the great John Wesley himself being an example.

In the large front chamber of his house hung an oil painting of Queen Anne. Of the history of this picture I have no knowledge, and no one living can tell where it came from. The queen is painted with a crown and sceptre, and a falcon upon one arm. There were several holes through the canvas, said to have been the work of rude and irreverent boys, who took pleasure in thus insulting the royal majesty of England, by discharging their popguns at this effigy of a queen. This mutilation was, of course, done after the colonies had revolted from the mother country.

Our first minister in the East precinct, as every one knows, was Rev Josiah Dennis. He endeared him-

self to the people of his charge by fourths of a century. The ashes of his upright character, uniform kindness and mirthfulness of disposition. Many anecdotes have been preserved of his quiet humor. He once gave one of his neighbors who was going to Boston in a vessel a memorandum of some articles to be procured. When this person came to consult his list he could make nothing of it. He brought it back to Mr Dennis, who himself could not read it. "Well," he said, "I did not write it to read myself, I wrote it for you to read." Another time, returning from a marriage, where the contracting parties were a Mr Robbins and a Miss Crowell, he met a friend, who asked where he had been. "Oh," he said, "to marry a Robin to a Crow." It seems he kept a small store in a part of his house, where the rats had gnawed a hole through the floor. The simple-hearted old divine had placed a bag of shot over the hole to keep the rats out. The result was the loss of his shot down the hole. When Mr Dennis saw how the experiment had worked, he good naturedly exclaimed, "I have shot a rat!" Going to Eastham to exchange, he found upon his desk, or in the pulpit, a large number of notes—as they were called—of persons about to leave home for a voyage to sea. Looking over them he noticed there were only two names among them. So holding them in his hand, as he rose to pray, he said: "Here are a parcel of Cooks and Cobbs desiring the prayers of this church and congregation, being bound to sea." Mr Dennis and his successor, the Rev Nathan Stone, were men of the highest character, and their united labors covered three-

both, as well as the Rev Caleb Holmes, who had a comparatively short ministry, rest in the cemetery at Dennis. There does not seem to have been any great disturbing questions in theology to trouble the peace of the church during the ministry of these devout and blameless men. Whatever we may now think of the dogmas held by the churches of their day, there can be no doubting the value of the practical teaching of the pulpit in forming the character of the people.

But to return to old houses. In that part of Nobscussett where Mr John Hall chose his estate, at the brook already noticed, there stands an old two-story, double house built by Mr Joseph Hall, grandson of Mr John Hall. He kept a store and was known as "Merchant Hall." In close proximity to the house, within twenty-five years, stood two other large two-story dwellings, belonging to the Hall family. Just beyond the limits of Nobscussett, under the shadow of Scargo hill, the loftiest elevation on the Cape, may yet be seen a venerable mansion, the home of several generations of the Paddock family. Nearby is the family burying ground. Representatives of this name are to be found widely scattered through the country. Mr Amos Otis used to say the old Paddock house was the oldest in Dennis. It is possible that Ichabod Paddock, to whom belongs the honor of instructing the men of Nantucket in the art of capturing whales, may have been born in this house. Adino Paddock, the first person in Boston to set up a coach, and for whom were named the famous Paddock elms, might have gone out

from that venerable old mansion.

That the men of the second and third generations from the first comers to the Cape, could have obtained the means to erect such substantial buildings as we still see standing here and there, is striking evidence that they labored industriously, lived frugally, and planned

wisely, proving themselves worthy descendants of those

"Who boundless seas passed o'er and boldly met in every path,
Famine and pest and savage wrath;
To dedicate a shore, where liberty's glad race might proudly come
And set up there an everlasting home."

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